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ABSTRACT

Peer mediation programs in schools are an effective way for children to learn the cooperative skills of conflict solving. This paper outlines the implementation of an action research based mediation program within a primary school setting. It examines both the characteristics of successful implementation and the dilemmas of change agentry. A model for cooperative skills in conflict solving is also outlined. It is suggested that peer mediation cannot exist in isolation and that connection to school philosophy, links with curriculum, effective teaching and learning practices, and a collaborative approach to professional practices are all important. The practices presented here are based on five core beliefs: (1) relationships are pivotal to the development of a child's social functioning; (2) cooperative relationships promote a deeper desire for learning; (3) teachers and schools can help promote positive relationships; (4) interpersonal conflicts are a part of life; and (5) lessons children learn about themselves will help them make connections later in life. Key aspects of one successful program are presented, along with a six-step outline of the process and theoretical assumptions. The benefits of instituting such a program include conflict resolution skills, higher self esteem, and an overall improvement of the school's climate. (Contains 11 references.) (RJM)

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PATHWAYS TO PEER MEDIATION

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ABSTRACT

Peer mediation programmes in schools are an effective way for children to learn the co-operative skills of conflict solving. This paper outlines the implementation of an action research based mediation programme within a primary school setting. It examines both the characteristics of successful implementation and the dilemmas of change agentry. A model for conceptualizing the multiple pathways for teaching the co-operative skills for conflict solving is presented. A metacognitive cycle for teaching these skills is also articulated. This cycle encapsulates the principles of effective teaching and learning through integrated curriculum and different ways of knowing. As such, the model offers an integral link between curriculum, the work of class teachers and guidance officer.

Co-operative relationships with others is an essential life skill. The ability to collaborate in teams, to negotiate diversity and to demonstrate tolerance through an understanding of difference are important skills in preparing young learners to become responsible global citizens of the future.

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PATHWAYS TO PEER MEDIATION

"The degree to which I can create relationships which facilitate the growth of others as separate persons is a measure of the growth I have achieved in myself." Carl Rogers

Teachers and school communities across Australia are seeking effective ways for children to build co-operative relationships with each other. Social problems existent in our broader community are reflected in schools. Bullying, fighting, bickering, threatening, teasing and friendship conflicts are an inevitable part of a school day. Large amounts of educators' time and energy are expended. Stress and overload are real issues of behaviour management for many people.

Peer mediation is an effective strategy which can enrich school practices in dealing with student conflicts. This paper explores and reflects upon the implementation of peer mediation at Cairns West Primary School. Based on an action research methodology, it outlines the processes used in the establishment of the programme, an evaluation of outcomes and the development of ongoing strategies. Key features important for success are delineated. Dilemmas of change agentry are noted. The paper also outlines a model for the co-operative skills of conflict solving. Peer mediation cannot exist in isolation. Connections to school philosophy, links with curriculum, effective teaching and learning practices and a collaborative approach to professional practices are important. This model attempts to provide this essential link towards a holistic and integrated approach to managing everyday conflict.

Beliefs: The practices outlined further in the paper are embedded in the following beliefs:

- Relationships are pivotal to the development of a child's social and psychological functioning.
- A focus on co-operative relationships will promote a deeper desire for learning, which will enhance academic achievement and self esteem.
- Teachers and schools are potent and influential sources in promoting positive relationships. These are achieved through:
  - modelling appropriate conflict resolution skills;
  - designing effective learning structures to mediate children's knowledge of the social world;
  - teaching the explicit skills to relate with others;
  - influencing children's understanding to act responsibly in terms of differences.
- Interpersonal conflicts are acknowledged as a natural part of everyday life. Children need to develop a coherent perception of conflict and to acquire the tools to interpret and deal with differences.
- Valuable lessons children learn about themselves in relation to others will help them make connections when they venture into a world increasingly dependent on co-operation and interdependent relationships.

SCHOOL BASED PEER MEDIATION : BRIEF OVERVIEW

Background History: Much of the thrust for school based mediation programmes originated from community dispute resolution programmes, both in America and New Zealand. With an increase of violence and aggression in schools and a growing lack of success with traditional discipline methods, partnerships between school and community flourished. The National Association for Mediation in Education (NAME) was established in 1984 to encourage the adoption of peer mediation in schools. Many pioneering projects such as PROJECT SMART (School Mediation Alternate Resolution Team), Conflict Management Programme, Wakefield Junior High Peer Mediation Programme, the Hawaii Mediation Project and the Mediation in Schools programme in New Mexico, developed as a result of NAME's efforts. In New Zealand, Hagley High School Mediation Project also developed as a result of a community mediation programme.

Definition: *To my mind, the most refreshing insights on peer mediation are those offered by the Year 6 Peer Mediators at Cairns West School:*

- Peer Mediator: *"To mediate is to guide — a peer is a friend. A peer mediator guides friends."*
- Peer Mediation: *"It's like a jigsaw puzzle. There are quarrels and fights. We help put the pieces together."*

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A more formal definition of mediation is that it is a strategy for dispute resolution. It is a voluntary process whereby students in conflict communicate with each other by using a structured problem solving process to work towards a functional agreement. It is a win/win process, which can be used in conjunction with traditional means of discipline. The types of disputes referred for peer mediation are usually negotiated by whole staff. Typically these include gossips/rumours, friendship disputes, arguments/pending arguments, harassment, jealousy, invasion of privacy, minor property disputes and teasing. More severe disputes such as those involving weapons, drugs, injuries or major cultural or family crises are not referred for mediation.

McCormick (1989) points out that aggression and bullying are learned styles of conflict. Through peer mediation these children can learn a non-aggressive style for managing conflict.

The role of a mediator is to facilitate a process, not to act in an adversarial role or to offer advice or solutions. Mediation emphasises that the disputants own the problem and have voluntarily sought mediation.

Even if an agreement is not reached, disputants may still benefit from the process.

The whole concept of peer mediation represents a fundamental conceptual shift from teacher centred discipline management to child centred management (see Table 1).

TEACHER MEDIATED INTERVENTIONS	PEER MEDIATED INTERVENTIONS
• Encourage children to depend on teachers to sort out peer relationship conflicts, or to mete out punishment. • Restrict outcomes. Typical questions such as: – Who's to blame? – Why did you do it? bog down the problem solving process. • Emphasise punishment for action rather than allowing the opportunity to develop reflection and self responsibility.	• Acknowledge problem ownership as the students. Consequently, increased commitment and responsibility to seek win/win outcomes is desired. • Foster perceptions, sensitivity and an awareness of the way others are affected by actions. • Provide valuable practice with learned skills of problem solving, communication and negotiation. • Allow children to learn that there are multiple options for seeking resolution. • Enhance self esteem. • Promote transference of learned skills to other settings and conflict situations.

Table 1 : Discipline focus for student-student disputes

Theoretical Assumptions: There are a number of theoretical assumptions upon which peer mediation programmes are based. Firstly, conflict is acknowledged as an unavoidable part of life. It is viewed as an opportunity for students to learn and grow (Cohen, 1987; Roderick, 1988). Secondly, a major reason for success in peer mediation is that it capitalises on the minimal power differential of peers.

Erickson's theory of human development espouses that adolescents are receptive to peer mediation because in their struggle to form an identity, they have a desire to handle their own affairs (Erickson, 1968).

Jason and Rhodes (1989) note that "Peers serve as a potent role model, demonstrate pro-social behaviours, create and reinforce norms that certain behaviours are deviant rather than acceptable and promote alternatives to these activities" (cited Lane and McWhirter, 1992).

Bandura's social learning theories emphasise the importance of modelling as a powerful strategy. In the context of peer mediation, students learn by imitating significant others. They develop metacognitive skills regarding behaviour and are motivated to change.

Peer mediation can help promote positive nurturing behaviours and help make clear the shared values of a school. Consequently, the modelling of such behaviours can directly strengthen the norms in a school and influence a positive school culture.

School based peer mediation programmes are a relatively new introduction to school settings. A review of the literature indicates that although the programmes lack solid research methodologies, there are consistencies across programme evaluations. Before highlighting some of the evidence, it is important to note as Cohen (1987) points out, that for every successful peer mediation programme, there is another programme that has failed or is struggling to survive. Peer mediation challenges a school's traditional view of conflict management and resistance to such change could bring about failure. Consequently, the implication of this is that before setting up a programme, an assessment of the school's ethos and full commitment must be established.

CAIRNS WEST PEER MEDIATION

Cairns West is classified as a disadvantaged school, with a population of approximately 550 students. A large percentage of the children are of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent. A fully integrated programme for hearing impaired children exists.

The School's vision is grounded in a holistic philosophy of "Valuing People". The philosophy is operationalised through a curriculum which is selective and integrative, a management structure which is collaborative in it's decision making and teaching practices which centre on principles of co-operative learning. Each year level has a core theme based on the "Valuing People" philosophy.

Playground rules reflect the essence of this philosophy:

"At Cairns West we:
- expect behaviour to be better
- make an effort to sort out a problem quickly
- have a way of sorting out problems
- know that everyone has rights — the right to a safe environment, to be treated with respect and fairness and the right to a total school environment free from distraction."

One of the strategies which reflects the school's vision for "a way of sorting out problems" is peer mediation. At present, Cairns West has both a classroom and school based peer mediation programme.

KEY ASPECTS OF PROGRAMME

The key aspects of the action research processes are outlined below:

Establishing Pre-Conditions: A ***need*** existed in the school for a lateral approach to managing playground conflict. This was established through the Managing Student Behaviour Programme, the Collaborative School Review and referrals to the school principal and guidance officer.

Connections were made with the school's ethos and philosophy for behaviour and learning:
- People are valued.
- Staff generally model appropriate conflict management strategies. The manner in which adults speak with children is important in creating a win/win attitude, as is the respect for rights, needs and feelings of others.
- Curriculum reflects programmes centred around affective development and interpersonal growth.
- A heightened sense of gender, race and equity issues are addressed. As different cultures view conflict differently, the Aboriginal/Islander staff were consulted.

Awareness Raising and **Training** for staff in the skills of conflict resolution and mediation was developed. Research findings, readings and in-service programmes were delivered.

Commitment from the school in terms of training time, implementation needs, roles and responsibilities was established. A committee was formed with a teacher as co-ordinator.

Classroom level: As a result of a successful pilot programme, all children in Years 6 and 7 have the opportunity to learn conflict resolution and mediation skills. These are collaboratively taught by the guidance officer and class teachers. In this way, these skills are infused as one of the school's "ways of sorting out problems". Children's acceptance and awareness of mediation is heightened. They learn a process for peer helping. Opportunities to practice mediation skills for conflicts such as teasing, friendship disputes, gossiping, rumours and minor property disputes are available for each classroom.

The concept for a classroom based mediation programme is part of a philosophy which links beliefs and values about individual differences and conflict with beliefs and values about children's learning. Classrooms as caring community of learners value and nurture diversity, embrace peer interactions and focus on building relationships. Learning is active. It is about meaning making and it is holistic. Developing responsible learners who have ownership for their learning necessitates a focus on relationships. Values such as tolerance, fairness, respect and helping need to be explicitly taught.

Conflicts occur in everyday aspects of class life and are opportunities for this type of integrative focus. Everyday learning opportunities include:

- stages of group development
- changes of teachers or when new children arrive
- power struggles with authoritarian style of teaching
- decision making at a small team on whole class level
- creation of inclusive classrooms
- friendship conflicts related to developmental stages of growth.

The classroom mediation programme has a conceptual frame of reference which is depicted in Figure 1. The model for co-operative skills of conflict solving is based on psychosocial and social cognitive theories which focus on children's ability to empathise and take perspective.

Fig 1 : A developmental model for teaching the co-operative skills for conflict solving

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Peers are recognised as potent agents of learning and behaviour change. Peer mediated interventions are woven throughout the model by:

- principles of co-operative team learning which promote positive relationships
- the use of peer mediation skills.

Developing a cohesive classroom based on principles of co-operation and learning is foundational to teaching children the skills to deal with differences: communication, problem solving, conflict management, negotiation and mediation.

The skills outlined in this model need to be taught explicitly. Figure 2 is a metacognitive teaching cycle for teaching these co-operative skills. The cycle incorporates the powerful element of modelling and a plan for teaching:

- start with reflection
- ensure the skill is taught explicitly
- provide guided practice of the skill to overlearn it
- enable transfer of the skill to natural settings
- monitor the effective use of skill.

"Learning Together: The Co-operative Skills of Conflict Solving" (Singh, in press) details the background and lesson plans for these conceptual frameworks.

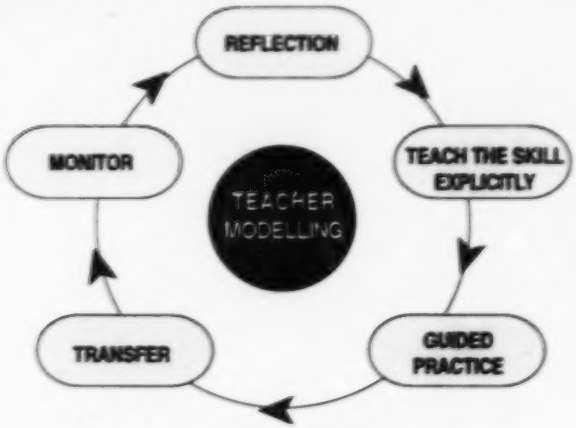

Fig 2 : A Metacognitive Teaching Cycle

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School Level: School-wide mediators work in pairs during lunch time and are identified by T-shirts. They are rostered on duty and provide a service for beneficiaries in Years 1 to 7. A teacher co-ordinates the roster and is available for debriefing. Meetings are held with mediators on a needs basis for problem solving any issues. Referrals for mediation are voluntary and many mediators assist informally where necessary. Major concerns are filtered through a staff member. The types of problems suitable for mediation have been negotiated through mediator training and staff meetings.

School wide peer mediators are selected through a participatory process. Self nomination, peer nominations and teacher nominations are used. The selection process includes issues of trust, leadership and communication ability, motivation for helping others and the ability to relate to peers. Parental permission is necessary. The selection process is also representative of the school in terms of gender and racial background. At risk or "unreceived leaders" are selectively included.

PEER MEDIATION PROCESS

The processes for mediation used by young children centres around simplicity and effectiveness. Role plays and co-operative teaching and learning principles have been found to be highly effective in synthesising the learnings. Affective issues are dealt with through a clarification of a peer mediator's role and responsibilities. A brief overview of the mediation steps is outlined in Table 2.

STEP 1: **Introduction and Ground Rules**	• Disputants are taken to a different area to cause physical and psychological separation from the initial point of conflict. • Confidentiality. • Mediators are neutral. • No interruptions or put-downs. • Agreement to co-operate.
STEP 2: **Listen to Both Sides**	Each disputant is asked to tell their side of the story. Effective listening, summarising, clarifying and reflecting on feelings are skills utilised.
STEP 3: **Find Common Ground**	The interests of each disputant is determined through perspective taking. Common 'wants' are established (e.g. "It sounds like each of you want ...").
STEP 4: **Brainstorm Options**	Rules for brainstorming.
STEP 5: **Select an Option**	Evaluate mutually acceptable options.
STEP 6: **Agreement and Close**	Depending on the setting and situation, agreement is sought verbally or in writing. Children may be asked to tell their friends the problem has been solved.

Table 2 : Overview of the mediation process (adapted, Shrump et al, 1991)

BENEFITS

For the school community:

- Acceptance and support for the programme. Conflict resolution techniques and mediation are an accepted way for dealing with differences.
- Overall improvement of school climate, as indicated by a significant reduction in referrals to school principal.
- A definite shift in ownership for certain types of conflict for many teachers. Cameron and Dupuis (1991) point out that "it has been estimated that it takes students two years to accept peer mediation as a dispute resolution process and teachers five years".
- Reduction of teacher time in sorting out differences.
- Parents of both mediators and disputants have commented very favourably. Many comment on how their children mediate disputes at home.

For the mediators:

- High level of self esteem and confidence.
- Acquisition of helping skills valuable in other aspects of school life, such as student advisory council.
- Transference of skills to other settings, such as home.
- Empowerment in being able to facilitate problem solving through improved communication and perspective taking skills.

For the disputants:

- A sense of achievement in being able to solve a conflict.

- Learning a responsible way of dealing with differences — *"I didn't know there were all these ways to sort out a problem" and "At first I thought: what is peer mediation? But now, I don't have to depend on teachers or my parents to sort out friendship problems. I can take it step by step and not just say – let's shake hands and be friends".*
- A learned ability to take perspectives.

DILEMMAS

Continuous school changes and the support and maintenance of peer mediator skills are two challenging dilemmas. The support and maintenance of peer mediator skills is an essential component of implementation. This does require additional time and effort. However, these skills are facilitated in an environment where such programmes are linked with curriculum, effective teaching and learning practices and a collaborative approach to professional action.

Peer mediation is a labour intensive programme in terms of managing continuous change in schools. This is particularly so when there are staff changes. Such changes demand time and effort for awareness raising, training and for collaborative planning and implementation.

Fullan (1993) states that change is a complex, non-linear process — a journey loaded with uncertainty. Schools as learning organisations are experts at dealing with change as a normal part of life. He comments that productive change is *"the ability to engage in continuous corrective analysis and action; the ability to survive the vicissitudes of planned and unplanned change while growing and developing."*

Learning organisations work on the core capacities of change agentry: personal vision, mastery, inquiry and collaboration.

Senge (1994) believes that change management occurs through *"... organisations where people continually expand their capacity to create results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free and where people are continually learning to learn together."*

Managing change is a collaborative effort. It requires an ability to work with paradoxes and to view problems as a source of creative resolution. Being conscious of the nature of change and change processes and the ability to engage in multiple systems thinking are important.

CONCLUSION

Peer mediation is an effective strategy for helping children learn co-operative skills to deal with differences. It is not something to 'do' but rather a philosophy which links values and beliefs about children's learning with their role in becoming responsible global citizens of the future. Pathways to peer mediation is a journey of continuous learning, where *"the real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes."* (Marcel Proust)

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